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Minus One

“I’m so excited to go to school tomorrow!” I said this often in my early childhood years. As a kid, I spent my Saturdays in the basement with a whiteboard and invisible students, acting as if I was the teacher. I made and printed worksheets. I created class rosters. I did everything that I thought teachers did, and loved every second of it. I always loved school. When people asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I typically responded with “teacher.” Little did I know that after 13 years of school, and four years of college, I would want to spend the rest of my life in a classroom, all because of one math class.

My greatest intellectual passion begins just two short years ago in my junior year of high school. I was taking a pre-calculus class. The first few months of this class were rocky, due to a last minute, long-term substitute taking the place of the regular teacher. Having very little background knowledge of pre-calc and a teacher who had been out of the classroom for quite some time, felt like a recipe for disaster. My frustrations and anger were at an all time high two months into my junior year, which was supposedly the toughest year of high school. The end of the first quarter came and our regular teacher returned. Slowly, order was returned to that third block pre-calc class. Day after day went by, and I fell into a consistent cycle of doing the homework and taking tests. As someone who sets high standards for themselves, I expected nothing less than an “A” in that class or in any class for that matter. My tests were handed back with a minus one or minus one-half written on the top. Instead of being over-joyed like any normal

person would have been, I was frustrated. I became frustrated with myself for not seeing the small errors. I was frustrated with myself for not hitting 100%. Most people would have been over the moon about scores like mine on pre-calc tests. For myself, I saw it as a challenge. Many times, I hit just below 100% and time and time again, I would strive for that perfect score. Although I was not receiving the scores I desired, I made it my mindset to work towards that perfect score the entirety of that course.

One day, approximately mid-May, our teacher informed us that we had a two-part final. Being that I was still in high school, I had very little experience with finals and I was not excited, nor did I recall ever hearing this information before. However, there was no need to worry because our teacher prepared us well. In preparation for this final, I worked on practice problems with friends. One day, I came to a realization: I had never felt hatred towards walking to math class. Somedays I did not want to go, but not because I did not like math. More often, it was just laziness. There were days I actually looked forward to my math classes. In preparation for the pre-calc final, I noticed that my friends would stress over their homework, cry if they did not understand it, and absolutely despised setting foot in the math room at all. I was in awe for a split second that people could actually hate such a subject. However, the more I thought about it, the more I realized just how crazy I must be to actually have such a passion for math.

Preparing for the final brought on stress, just like any class would, but math had always been my strength, so there was no reason for me to get all worked up about it. It was in these final days of junior year that I realized the passion that I had for math. The last day of class we received our finals back with the grade written at the top. This time, there was no minus one or minus one half; there wasn't even a minus two. Rather, there was only a 100% written on the top of not just the first part or the second part, but both. It was a moment in my life that I felt nothing

but pride. I knew I worked hard and earned that grade. There was no favoritism or subjectivity involved because it was math. This means it was either right or it was wrong. Looking around the room, I saw faces of defeat and faces of joy. I heard chatter over different problems.

Meanwhile, I sat in the very front of the classroom, next to one of my best friends, and I smiled. I tried to hide my test from others, so as not to gloat about my score. I believe there is a fine line between being proud and sharing that with others, and bragging. I did everything in my power not to cross that line because this grade was not handed to me on a silver platter, but rather, it was the result of hard work and determination.

The word got out that I aced my pre-calc final, but little did everyone know just how much that grade meant to me. The kind comments from my classmates made me feel good about myself, but in a way I felt a pit of sadness for all those who did not do as well as they had hoped. I realized that unlike myself, math does not come easy for most people. That 100% meant more to me than just the A that it corresponded to on the grading scale. That 100% meant I overcame the minor errors that I had been struggling with all year. That 100% meant I overcame the unfamiliar stress of a final. That 100% meant that I survived junior year with my 4.0 intact. That 100% meant that I balanced all my college-level classes and still did very well. That 100% meant that maybe I was supposed to do something with this passion and ability.

Flash forward to today: I am pursuing a degree in mathematics. This day could look a lot different if my junior year of pre-calc shook out any differently. I am forever grateful for my pre-calc teacher as she walked alongside me. She taught me everything I needed to know to pass that final with flying colors and ignited the fire inside of me. That little fire of math was always inside me, but just hadn't been discovered yet. Now that it is lit, I know that my future will forever include math. It will be present as I continue to be challenged in my math courses. I was

so greatly impacted by that junior year of pre-calc that I am hoping to end up with a career in a high school math classroom. I want to ignite that same fire in my future students. That “minus one” may have made me frustrated, but really, it only fueled my fire to finding my greatest intellectual passion and achievement.